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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory study of the administrative culture of an effective school district (as indicated by state and national recognitions). The findings indicate that a rich culture of shared values, perceptions, and beliefs pervades the administrative ranks at both district and school site levels. These findings suggest that symbolic language, coupled with myths and legends, contribute to the development of shared values in which administrators believe in the district as an "ideological system" and the superintendent as "symbolic chief." This implies that symbolic or cultural dimensions can contribute, in a variety of ways, to the overall effectiveness of a district's organization by increasing personal self-worth, motivation, and commitment. Extensive interviews with 70 percent of the district administrators were conducted. A key finding was the effects attributed to the motivational management style of the superintendent. Included are 21 references. (LMS)

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Exploring District Culture: Administrator's Shared Values, Perceptions, and Beliefs of Their District's Management Model

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Abstract

This is an exploratory study of the administrative culture of an effective school district (as indicated by state and national recognitions). The findings indicate that a rich culture of shared values, perceptions, and beliefs pervade the administrative ranks, district and school site levels. These findings suggest that symbolic language, coupled with myths and legends, contribute to the development of shared values in which administrators believe in the district as an "ideological system" and the superintendent a "symbolic chief." This implies that symbolic or cultural dimensions can contribute to, in a variety of ways, the overall effectiveness of a district's organization by increasing personal self-worth, motivation, and commitment.

It has been stated that organizations are "political arenas" oriented around the pursuit and display of power (Crozier, 1964; Pfeffer, 1981). Power in and of itself is neither good nor bad. It is the ability to get things done. The art of "reading" situations is a skill effective administrators employ in attempting to organize or manage (Morgan, 1986). This skill usually develops as an intuitive process learned through experience and natural ability. Further, Morgan (1986) contends, through the use of metaphor, organizations are cultures composed of ideas values, norms, rituals, and beliefs that sustain themselves as socially constructed realities.

Organizations are themselves culture-producing phenomena (Louis, 1985; Siehl, 1985; Tichy, 1983). Organizations are seen as social instruments that produce goods and services, and as a by-product, produce distinctive cultural artifacts such as rituals, legends, and ceremonies. As such, one is concerned with articulating patterns of contingent relationships among collections of variables that appear to figure in organizational survival (Smircich, 1983). The environment presents imperatives for behavior that administrators may enact in their organizations through

symbolic means (Pfeffer, 1981). This implies that symbolic or cultural dimensions in some way contribute to the overall systemic balance and effectiveness of an organization. Recent articles (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982) argue that organizations with "strong cultures" are indeed apt to be more successful.

The forces and processes through which organizational participants are socialized into the organization has been called "corporate culture" (Owens, 1987). In educational settings, Sergiovanni (1984) defines culture as the organization's climate and clan that are combined tightly into structured values loosely structured in the system. It has been further defined as the normative glue which holds the organization together (Siehl, 1985; Tichy, 1983). It expresses values or social ideals and the beliefs that organization members come to share (Louis, 1985). Shared values are determined by what is important. Perceptions are behavioral norms expressed in how things are done. Beliefs are what one believes is true (Owens, 1987).

The sharing of a community philosophy (Owens, 1987; Sergiovanni, 1984), i.e., ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and

norms offers the rules-of-the-game, both formally and informally. These values or patterns of belief are manifested by symbolic devices such as myths and rituals (Deal & Kennedy, 1982), stories (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1976), legends and specialized language (Andrew & Hirsch, 1983).

Although Ouchi's (1981) Theory Z, and Peters' and Waterman's (1982) In Search of Excellence brought immediate attention to organizational or corporate culture, the workplace environment has long been considered important for maximum manager-employee effectiveness (Likert, 1967). Workers are more productive if, for example, they have a clear sense of direction and share common values with the organization (Drake, 1984; Likert, 1967; Weick, 1985). Cultural analysis moves one in the direction of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions raising issues of context and meanings, and brings to the surface underlying values.

Most corporate culture studies (Morgan, 1986; Owens, 1987) have been based on the premise that cultural artifacts are powerful symbolic means of communication, that can be used to: build organizational commitment, rationalize and legitimate

activity, motivate personnel, and facilitate socialization (Owens, 1987).

Likewise, effective school research (Sergiovanni, 1984) has found that successful organizations are organizations that have found ways to reward and motivate their employees so that they come to see themselves as winners. Sergiovanni (1984) links leadership to the symbolic "Chief" and culture to "high priest" metaphors. Both metaphors represent an essential presence to excellence in the schooling process, though absence does not appear to negatively impact routine competence. School leaders are creative visionaries willing to take risks in pursuit of cherished values and able to cling to a vision with a tenacity that is contagious to nearly everyone (Greenfield, 1987). Morgan (1986) states that less effective managers and problem solvers, seem to interpret everything from a fixed standpoint rather than remaining open and flexible, suspending immediate judgments whenever possible.

As all organizations have cultures, so do schools. Some may be strong or weak, functional or dysfunctional (Sergiovanni, 1984). Morgan (1986) found successful organizations have an ethos that is shaped by those in

power modeling the values they support in the organization. Recent studies on school effectiveness have identified a clear and vital mission (Boyer, 1983), clearly articulated goals and identities (Lightfoot, 1983), positive values (Squires, Huitt, & Segars, 1983) and a strong functional culture aligned with a vision of excellence (Sergiovanni, 1984) equates successful schools.

Excellent schools are composed of values and beliefs that take on sacred or cultural characteristics (Sergiovanni, 1984). Weick's (1985) concept of organizations is that they are enactments of shared realities which produce systems of shared meaning. Shared values represent for that which the organization stands (Greenfield, 1987).

The purpose of this study was to explore the organizational culture of a "successful/effective" school district's management style as experienced by its administrators. The specific questions addressed were: (a) What shared values, as determined by what is important, exist? (b) What common perceptions, as to how things are done, exist? and (c) What beliefs, as what one believes is true, exist?

Method

Sample

Participants consisted of district level and school site level administrators (administrator was defined as one who evaluates certificated personnel). The study was done in a rural-suburban public school district in the San Joaquin Valley in California. The district was chosen due to its national and state-wide recognition, i.e., U.S. Department of Education National Recognition Program for Exemplary School Status awarded to one elementary 1985-86 (n = 13), one intermediate level 1984-85 (n = 2), and one high school level 1986-87 (n = 2). Presently, a different elementary school is in the finals for 1987-88. These schools meet state standards first then move forward to the national recognition program of exemplary school status. Seventy percent of the district's administrators agreed to a two-hour interview (n = 33), 13 of which were from the district office. Seventy-six percent were male (n = 25), and 24% female (n = 8), and 76% (n = 25) had 6 years or more in administration in this district while 24% (n = 8) had 5 years or less.

Data Collection and Analysis

District level and school site level administrators were interviewed using an interview protocol developed for this study. Questions focused on the motivational management system (used to direct and access progress toward district goals), internal and external motivators, district mission, success indicators, mentors, descriptions of oneself, perception of superintendent's impact, and legends and myths alive in the district culture. Derived from the works of Sergiovanni (1984), Likert (1967), Owens (1987), and Morgan (1986), these open-ended questions gathered information about the school district's organizational processes that produce shared meaning through the development of their values, perceptions, and beliefs concerning the district management philosophy. The interviews lasted 2 to 3.5 hours, while interviewer teams of two or three took notes.

The analysis of the data was qualitative and descriptive. Collecting, sorting, and summarizing data such as significant historical events in the organization and their implications for present-day behavior is accomplished through the study of the impact of their organizational "heroes" and the

influence of traditions and organizational myths (Owens, 1987). Naturalistic inquiry necessitates a subscription to a qualitative phenomenological hypothesis that holds one cannot understand human behavior without understanding the framework within which the individuals under study interpret their environment and this can best be understood through understanding their thoughts, feelings, values, perceptions, and their actions (Owens, 1987).

Raw data was translated into three theme categories: shared values, perceptions, and beliefs. This ordering allowed the discovery of commonalties or patterns, defined to be: what is known to be important (shared values); behavioral norms as to how "things are done" (perceptions); and what is felt to be true (beliefs). Potential problems of reliability may occur with self-report data. Consequently, also collected and reviewed were a variety of district-level documents (i.e., management model's goals and objectives, statements, district accountability status reports).

Findings

A description of the shared values, perceptions, and beliefs indicate an organizational culture at the administrative level, rich in legends, stories, and

platitudes, which support high motivational feelings of commitment to the district and superintendent.

Shared Values

Shared values were defined by what is important. A clear emerging of the strong leadership presence of the Superintendent was evidenced in multiple ways. The perceived success of the district was attributed to "Doc" (the superintendent), his longevity (28 years as superintendent), and his philosophy. As stated by a site level administrator, "Doc is the most admired person in the district by administrators because he is a visionary, he has the ability to see the whole picture of the district, he always has specific goals for the district, and he has never compromised his goals or philosophy that we are here because of and for the students."

The superintendent was further described to be disarming, consistent, a living legend, a man with a focus. "He is motivating and inspiring, with great intuitive sense." A real "mover and shaker," not afraid of trying something new. The primary themes, that he has the "unique ability to see ahead of us" and that the "district administrators have all bought into

his beliefs and philosophy," were amazingly retold with each interview.

The motivational management style (the Cooperative Competition Model--C/C Model) was seen as the tool which prioritizes the district's mission by providing standardized goals, objectives, and evaluation methods consistent with the pervading philosophy of "a fair break for every kid." The C/C Model is seen as the mechanism which ensures good programs are provided at all schools in the district. The goal of the district is to produce students who are winners in life. A winner was defined as a "successful person" who learns to focus on a task, meet challenges, and continues to be a learner.

The motivational management style (C/C Model) was born when the superintendent early on recognized that wide discrepancies existed between district goals and school and student achievement of these goals. The competition philosophy, the primary ingredient of the C/C Model, was created to help build programs. The personal philosophy of "Doc" as expressed was that competition was motivating because "the only way to improve yourself is to improve others."

A continuous theme of shared values was that the C/C Model is sometimes misconstrued. A realization that the intent of the C/C Model which uses a strong symbolic language of military terminology, i.e., Red and Blue Attack Units, most common administrative platitude "Sic 'Em," requires that parents and the larger community need to be better informed. The administrators expressed the shared value unanimously that "winning does not just mean coming in first." The primary themes of shared values regarding the philosophy of the C/C Model were expressed as: (a) a strong belief in all kids, (b) strong work ethic needed to work in the district, and (c) a strong belief in the system itself.

Perceptions

Perceptions were defined as the administrators' perceptions of behavioral norms on how to get things done. The perception of the superintendent was that loyalty to him and his system was a key factor to their own success. Most felt that they had input into the district's mission and that a tight loyal pecking order was needed to be followed. As one administrator stated, "the district tells we site level principals what to do, but we decide how to do it. This is how we

develop ownership. We are loosely controlled but highly accountable" (through the C/C Model mechanism). Another principal stated, "We are in the trenches . . . so we have a great deal of input because we are the implementors on the practical level of the total mission."

Administrators perceive that a winner is a nonquitter and therefore is a winner in life, hence they must display the work ethic to always strive to be the best they can be. "Doc" is admired because he is seen as someone who has never compromised his goals or philosophy that "we are here for kids." Therefore, all felt that they too must live up to this belief. The need to strive for excellence is both an internal motivator to the administrators interviewed and an external perception of how to get ahead within the district.

Most administrators felt the next major influence (after "Doc") on district success was the quality of their ranks. They perceive themselves to be strong, goal-oriented, organized, pro-active individuals. They are allowed the autonomy to completely determine the methods they wish to use to accomplish district goals. They are expected to determine their own needs, fill

them, select staffs that fill their on-site needs, and build loyalty for themselves and their programs. They are trusted with the independence necessary to show they can succeed, and in this way, "Doc" is providing the kind of atmosphere he prefers for himself. Most administrators shared the perception that teachers are similar to them. As one principal stated, "We get people who are willing to go the extra mile . . . self-sacrificing . . . zealots." Some administrators felt that the lack of collective bargaining was a force which allowed administrative flexibility to "implement programs when needed, without constraints . . . we can mobilize people and change direction."

Beliefs

The belief structure yielded some mixed findings. The themes that emerged reflected what the administrators thought or felt was true. All felt the district hiring process promoted ambitious motivated people into administration.

All felt that the Superintendent reflects the philosophy of the district. He has set clearly-defined goals and coupled with the stability of board of education membership (only 25 members in 28 years), the administrators felt the district was successful. The

"winning" aspect of the C/C Model was continually defined by the following platitude, "win with pride, lose with dignity." The C/C Model as one administrator stated it, "promotes you to do the best you can."

Most felt competition "mimics real life" and the C/C Model coincides with the competitive nature within each person. Some felt that at times the competition superseded the "cooperative side." Some believe it's paramount "to win" while a few felt that claiming everyone is equal, is not fair. The accountability point system is, by a few, viewed as "fair, if you're at the right school." Some felt that the pluses of the C/C Model that promoted teamwork, gives feedback and provides direction, while a few felt it might also encourage at times unethical behavior (at the teacher level). Likewise, a few were concerned as to just how failure was at times evaluated.

When describing themselves individually (use three words to describe yourself) most administrators felt their humanistic focus was their primary strength. Words used, by most were: people person, fair, sense of humor, honest; by some were: organized, dedicated, assertive; and by a few were: visionary. A "never say can't attitude" and loyalty coupled with abilities to

be a great team player were felt by most. Expressed by a principal, "We have all bought into Doc's beliefs and philosophies . . . . he doesn't believe in the comfort zone . . . . Doc will always climb the next mountain and fight the next battle." Legends were retold by most interviewed to demonstrate the evolution of the district's success. Specific legend/stories were the unification war stories, and the recall election.

Conclusions

Themes and patterns provide a rich description of the culture. The data showed that a strong organizational culture exists among this district's administrators and is recognized by the administrators through shared values as a primary reason for the district's "success.' It is a culture whose values and motivational management system, which is based on cooperative competition, have been mostly shaped over the years, by the superintendent.

Further, the shared values, perceptions, and beliefs of these administrators tell stories and maintain reinforcing myths (Sergiovanni, 1984), use metaphors (Morgan, 1986), and specialized language (Andrew and Hirsch, 1983). The following platitudes, all or most knew, show that specialized, symbolic

language is used to maintain and reward those who reflect the culture: (a) "Fair break for every kid," (b) "A child's right to an education is non-negotiable," (c) "Sic 'Em," (d) "Curriculum leaders are variable removers," (e) "We are too poor to buy cheap," and (f) "Win with class, lose with dignity." Metaphors such as," No one wanted to fight us so we divided up to fight each other" were expressed by some who spoke of the forming of a second district high school. The myths, stories, and legends support the contention that organizations are themselves culture-producing phenomena (Lovis, 1985; Siehl, 1985; Tichy, 1983). Research (Pfeffer, 1981; Smircich, 1983) has found that organizational environment is composed of patterns which figure into the organization's survival and contains imperatives for behavior. The legends, such as the "battle to unify" and the "recall election for Doc," coupled with the following story, depict an organization that, through these examples, "bonds" the motivational commitment to shared values (Sergiovanni, 1984) with its administrators. "We had never won a basketball championship and we wanted one. One of the high schools had a chance at an NYL championship. We won, but there were behavior problems in our stands.

The next morning, Doc called all the administrators in and really chewed them out. Doc said he would never put this plaque on his wall because he was ashamed of the behavior . . . a basic value had been violated." The perception to "keep values," and the belief that they will be rewarded for it, are powerful motivators.

Sergiovanni (1984) and Morgan (1986) emphasize that organizations that are "successful" and link themselves to excellence, display evidence in its members who believe in themselves as an ideological system, a culture composed by ideas, values, and beliefs that sustain themselves as socially constructed realities. The modeling of behavior by the superintendent has strongly shaped this district. The symbolic statement "Doc is the district" provides a unified vision. Statements repeated by most reflect this symbolic "chief" and his values: (a) "Doc sold all administrators on the ideal that people are more important than programs"; (b) "He keeps the message simple and repeats it continually"; (c) "He provides a clear, unambiguous focus; (d) "In search of excellence, he is consistent. He will not tolerate inconsistency. Consistency is the glue that holds the district together"; and (e) "He is disarming. From your first

impression, what you see is not what you get. He appears to be a country bumpkin. Then he opens his mouth and shows how very knowledgeable he is. He is brilliant, bright, and visionary." The administrators of this district have learned what is of value to the leader and district (Sergiovanni, 1984) hence solidifying their commitment.

Although administrators had some differing beliefs (as to what one believes is true), the values expressed and perceptions as to how to do things among both the veteran and new administrator were strikingly similar. Cultural artifacts are powerful symbolic means of communication that build commitment, rationalize, and legitimate activity, and facilitate socialization (Owens, 1987). The socialization process from the early levels of new administration to veterans, was expressed by the shared values of believing they themselves are ambitious, motivated, and ready to move on to the next level. Doc models the philosophy "move out of the comfort zone," thus encouraging and expecting that administrators get a wide range of experiences to prepare themselves for the next position. The tight loyalty pecking order ensures at each progressive level, that the "mentor" bringing the

neophyte along, knows what is valued in this district. The need to be a team player is paramount. As stated by a veteran, "With team playing, the team moves on even with a wounded player." To know the informal rules-of-the-game is essential, as is the reality in this district that "we believe in high standards and therefore, hire high achievers."

The motivational management model (C/C Model) began with the philosophical belief that "life is a game, a game trying to deal with problems." Doc expresses it this way, "If we start with playing, children next decide naturally to keep score . . . . now they are into winning and losing. With losing we want to teach kids not to quit." Likewise, he translates this belief about kids to his administrators and has set up a management process that "helps them be the best they can be."

Certainly, if districts are going to try to establish clear goals and create positive values they must create a strong, functional organizational culture among their administrators. This study explored the ethos of a district with schools of national recognition to find the themes and patterns shared. Shared values, beliefs of sacredness, and a

leader/visionary who pursues cherished values is the description researchers give us of excellent schools (Greenfield, 1987; Sergiovanni, 1984; Weick, 1985). This initial study of a district's organizational culture provides insight as to the "glue that holds this organization 'together,'" thus depicting a district rich in legends, myths, stories, and symbolic language, which unites and influences the administrators with a common vision.

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